Youth Accessibility to Flavored Tobacco: Focus Group Results

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The tobacco industry has a long history of using flavored tobacco to target youth and hook the next generation of smokers to a lifetime of addiction. The majority of youth who start experimenting with tobacco begin with flavored tobacco. These products come in a variety of flavors including bubble gum, grape, menthol, and cotton candy, most often sold in the form of e-cigarettes, hookah tobacco, cigars, smokeless tobacco, and even flavored accessories such as blunt wraps.

In 2018, The American Lung Association in California Center for Tobacco Policy and Organizing commissioned focus groups with various target populations to assess understanding of flavored tobacco products and gauge reactions to related policy proposals and messaging. Participants were shown documents and arguments from both public health organizations and the tobacco industry.

One of the major concerns surrounding flavored tobacco was youth’s accessibility and initiation. This document highlights quotes from various participants and policies to address these concerns.

Resources

For more resources on these policies, including the Matrix of Strong Local Tobacco Retailer Licensing Ordinances with policy and enforcement details for every strong ordinance in the state, visit: www.Center4TobaccoPolicy.org.

For model tobacco retailer licensing ordinance language, visit ChangeLab Solutions at www.changelabsolutions.org.

Focus Group Methodology

Goodwin Simon Strategic Research conducted focus groups with a total of 57 participants in three separate California locations. Two groups were conducted in Redding on April 5, 2018: one among white women and another with white men. Two more groups were held in Oakland on April 12, 2018: one among LGBTQ participants and another among Black men and women. Two final groups were conducted in Fresno on June 28, 2018: one among Latina women and another among Latino men (both in English).

Participants were recruited to ensure a mix of ages, education levels, political ideologies, non-smokers, and smokers. To avoid a predominance of potential experts in the discussion, physicians were excluded from the groups. However, non-physician health care workers and cashiers were allowed in each group, with a maximum of one each. Note that the findings from these focus groups represent in-depth qualitative, not quantitative, research.

Any numeric data presented from these findings is suggestive only and is not statistically generalizable to larger populations.
Targeting youth

Participants were angered by the tobacco industry's targeting of youth. Youth are easily enticed by flavors and are unaware of the consequences of these products.

Passing a local tobacco retailer licensing ordinance can give communities additional tools to protect youth.

“Because I firmly believe that they are marketing to teenagers and it is just opening a door to a lifelong addiction to tobacco products. I have worked with kids that—it is simple. They tell me they like vaping because they like to make a cloud come out of their mouth. They are coming from a place of innocence and it ends up not being there.”

—Rural White Woman

“...I am not going to turn a blind eye to little kids who will see this and really think that maybe in areas especially around schools. I don’t understand why they would target people that aren’t old enough to smoke the products anyway.”

—Latino Man

Tobacco Retailer License

A tobacco retailer license (TRL) ordinance allows a local jurisdiction to hold retailers accountable to tobacco laws, including youth sales laws. Youth purchase rate surveys before and after passing a TRL show the effectiveness of these policies to reduce youth access to tobacco.

In addition to a TRL, jurisdictions can add additional “plug-in” policy provisions to a retailer ordinance.

“...I just don’t like the fact that kids have access to it. Many of our younger people are fascinated by tobacco products and they don’t understand the dangers of consuming tobacco, in the long run what it does to their body. I don’t really think they care, but I feel the colors and the flavors and everything entices and makes them think ‘oh this is what I want to do’.”

—LGBTQ Woman

Density

Limiting the proximity of tobacco retailers to one another is especially beneficial in marginalized communities that have been historically targeted by the tobacco industry. Low income communities have a higher density of tobacco retailers and higher likelihood of those stores having increased tobacco storefront advertising.

Accessibility to Youth

In all the focus groups, participants were concerned with youth having access to tobacco products, especially in youth sensitive areas and marginalized communities.

Okay so it is the marketing that is going on and it is being marketed to minorities and low income communities, so they know how to target. They [tobacco companies] know how to get the young from these communities and elsewhere to buy into it so that they can for the long term get them hooked on it, addicted to it. That is what really pisses me off.

—Rural White Man

It is just directed at younger kids, like after school go straight to the store and buy that or get someone to buy it for them.

—LGBTQ Man

I think it is targeting the inner city kids where there are more liquor stores, where they have more access to it.

—African American Man

Youth Sensitive Areas

Jurisdictions can create tobacco free buffer zones around youth sensitive areas, such as prohibiting tobacco retailers 1,000 feet from schools.

Flavors Undermine Parenting

While almost all of the focus groups mentioned the importance of education and parents talking to their kids, a few participants highlighted their concerns with flavored tobacco undermining the efforts of parents. Reducing access of these products can help prevent youth from purchasing them.

I just feel it is true if it is out of sight, it is out of mind. If they don’t see it, then maybe they won’t crave it or think about it as much.

—LGBTQ Woman

...a lot of times kids don’t always listen to mom and dad. Mom and dad aren’t cool. Joe is cool. Joe smokes cotton candy cigarettes. I am going to smoke cotton candy cigarettes. We can educate our kids all day long, but if they have seen this forever, they might be tempted.

—Latino Man

For me it is scarier especially having a teenager, not that my child would do that, but with all the different flavors it would be more appealing for young kids than ever before.

—Latina Woman

Flavor Restrictions

Local communities can take a stance to protect youth from lifelong addiction. City-wide flavor restrictions can reduce youth access to flavored tobacco products in their community.